

# **Resolving the Conflict in the Western Sahara**

**Testimony before the  
House International Relations Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human  
Rights and International Operations**

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Co-Chairman, Congressional Morocco Caucus  
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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Payne, Members of the Subcommittee, it is a privilege to appear before you to testify about the very important problem in the Western Sahara.

I remember when I was in college in 1975. I had lived for many years in Spain and had attended high school at the American School of Madrid. Despite my youth, however, I was then, as I am today, a student as well as an opponent of colonialism and its evils. In November of 1975, exactly 30 years ago, the Spanish dictator, Franco, was on his deathbed after 40 years as dictator.

Most of Morocco had attained its independence from France and Spain in the decade of the 1950s, but the Western Sahara remained in Spanish colonialism's grasp. Morocco consistently claimed sovereignty over the Western Sahara for all those decades, but the Spanish regime would not yield. Then, in November 1975, with Franco on his deathbed, King Hassan II led hundreds of thousands of Moroccans, without firing a shot, into the Western Sahara and physically took possession of that part of Morocco that had for decades been forcefully held by the Spanish military regime. "The Green March," as it was called, was an extraordinary historic accomplishment.

It was not until after the "Green March," after Morocco had taken possession of the Western Sahara, that the "Polisario Front" proclaimed the so called "Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic."

Context is important when we consider any important issue. I think it is important to remember that the Kingdom of Morocco is our oldest and most enduring ally. The relationship between Morocco and the United States of America has existed throughout the history of our country. In December of 1777, when war raged between the American Colonies and Britain, Sultan Sidi Mohammed boldly recognized our young and not yet free Republic. That magnanimous act of recognition was cemented in a Treaty of Peace and Friendship between our countries, ratified in July of 1787. And that enduring document remains the oldest unbroken treaty in the history of the foreign relations of the United States.

The United States has had no better nor more constant friend and ally in the Maghreb, in North Africa, and in the Arab World, than Morocco.

Morocco, during the reign of King Hassan II, was a strong and vital supporter in the dangerous and prolonged struggle known as "The Cold War," and in the initial and critically delicate stages of the peace process between Israel and its neighbors.

We should not overlook, as well, that Morocco continues to be a voice for moderation and democratic pluralism in the Muslim world. Morocco has carried out genuine democratic reforms and conducted free and fair elections. The Parliament is elected directly by the people and comprises every sort of political party, representing ideologies from the right to the left on the entire political spectrum. In the 2002 elections, 35 female members were elected to Parliament. Parliamentary elections will be held in the fall of 2006 and again in 2007.

And today, under the leadership of King Mohammed VI, Morocco is providing key assistance in our common war against the forces of international terrorism. Both our peoples have been victims of the scourge of cowardly attacks upon unarmed civilians, and I believe that both nations have answered the challenge of this difficult time with strong leadership and decisive action.

I strongly believe that the United States Congress and the United States Government must be cognizant of and sensitive to the experience of Morocco regarding issues related to international terrorism. I believe that Morocco's insistence upon its territorial integrity in the Western Sahara is critically important not only for the national security of Morocco, but also for the security of the United States and of our European allies. Many of our European allies understand this reality and have made it clear. Some, in fact, have changed their policy in recent years to reflect this viewpoint; the current Spanish government, being one important example.

The issue of the Western Sahara must be resolved, and Morocco has reiterated that it agrees to continue to come to the table in an effort to find a reasonable solution to this problem. Despite the efforts of the United Nations and the international community, thousands of families continue to face hardship and suffering in refugee camps run by the "Polisario Front" in the Tindouf region of Algeria. Clearly, it is time to find a solution.

The United Nations tried for eight years and failed to find a way to bridge the differences between the parties. Both the Security Council and the United States have been calling on Algeria and Morocco to enter into direct talks to find a way to resolve this problem.

While we need to encourage these direct talks as a way to find a solution, again, for the sake of context, we should keep in mind who is being dealt with when we talk about the "Polisario Front". The "Polisario" has long maintained close relationships with communist and dictatorial regimes throughout the world. The "Polisario" counts among its closest friends the tyrants Fidel Castro and Maummar Gadaffi.

In fact, the “Polisario Front” continues to enjoy a long and unapologetic military relationship with the Cuban dictatorship, that has helped to arm and train the “Polisario” army from the very beginning: armed them to fight against one of the United States’ longest and most steadfast allies, Morocco.

I have met recently with two groups of people from the region who have given me first hand accounts of the “Polisario’s” fundamental lack of respect for human rights and international law. The first group was comprised of former Moroccan POWs who were held for more than 20 years in conditions that can only be called barbaric.

It is with satisfaction that I learned that these prisoners have now been freed and have returned to their loved ones.

More recently I met with a number of Sahraoui young people who had been taken by the “Polisario” from their families at a young age and shipped off for decades-long indoctrination in Libya or Cuba. Unlike with the POWs, this issue remains unresolved. Thousands of young people are in indoctrination schools in Cuba at this very moment, separated from their families and subjected to vile forms of anti-American indoctrination. The tragic histories of these young people, forced to live away from their loved ones, in many ways compares with the grotesque abuse that was suffered by the Moroccan POWs.

I understand that representatives of both of the groups I have mentioned are here with us in this room today and I hope that members of the Subcommittee will have the opportunity to hear first hand, as I have, about their sad experiences.

As I commend this Subcommittee for convening a hearing on this subject, I would urge you as well to hold a hearing on the “Polisario’s” practice of forcibly separating families.

It is time for Morocco and Algeria to sit down and find a political solution to this longstanding issue. I recognize that win/lose answers will not succeed in this regard. I believe that the concerns of all should be addressed by providing the inhabitants of the Western Sahara with a mechanism for genuine, profound autonomy, with full respect of Morocco's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Thank you.